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SUBJECT: INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY REFUTES GOS IDP RETURN CLAIMS

1. (SBU) SUMMARY. Recent local radio reports, based on a statement attributed to the Humanitarian Aid Commission (HAC) office in El Fasher, stated that as many as 4000 internally displaced persons in North Darfur were voluntarily returning to their villages. Separately, the North Darfur HAC commissioner claimed that as many as 61,000 IDPs may be returning throughout Darfur. International Organizations and local NGOs working in and around Darfur IDP camps, however, dismissed these claims as propaganda, noting that seasonal agricultural movement is common, but rarely results in permanent resettlement. In addition to the questionable veracity of such claims, conditions are not appropriate for return, and newly displaced persons continue to arrive at camps as violent attacks in Darfur continue to rise. END SUMMARY.

HAC Claims Widespread IDP Returns

2. (SBU) According to field FSN, recent radio reports, which were based on a statement issued by the Humanitarian Aid Commission (HAC), stated that 4000 IDPs were to return to their homes in North Darfur. In an April 30 meeting, North Darfur HAC Commissioner Ibrahim Ahmed Hamid claimed that returns of this nature "are not news" and happen all the time, but specifically around this time of year as people return to sow their fields. When asked whether these returns were permanent, Hamid snapped, "People return according to their interests, and I provide them with assistance. I don't ask whether returns are final or sustainable - it is not the time. It is only the time to help!" He claimed that his office was providing resettlement assistance for these returnees, consisting of plastic sheeting, tents, and some food staples, and pointed to their return as proof that roads and villages were safe and secure.

3. (SBU) Responding directly to news reports, Hamid repeatedly gave different answers as to the number of IDPs allegedly planning to return home. At one point, he produced a report from the "field" stating that 6422 individuals had already returned to Haskanita. He then explained that he did not know total figures, he could only account for those he had personally counted - 1127 families. Finally he said that 61,000 individuals had returned to the Dar Zaghawa area, a number he claimed had been given by the SLA/MM humanitarian coordinator. Hamid could not come up with a final estimate of returns, declaring "they are happening everywhere in Darfur."

International Community Sees No Signs of Returns...

4. (SBU) OCHA Humanitarian Affairs Officer In North Darfur confirmed that seasonal movements from IDP camps to the fields are common each year before the planting season begins. These movements are classified temporary returns, not permanent, and usually consist of 1-2 members of each family only. The motive for these movements is two-fold - families hope that a good harvest will provide extra food

and earn extra income, but perhaps more importantly, OCHA Officer explained, they sow their land in order to retain ownership claims. The traditional land system in Darfur holds that land that goes unplanted for three straight years is forfeited. More recently, a Sudanese Land Act passed in the 1970s allows the GOS to seize any unused land immediately. Anecdotal evidence collected by OCHA staff suggests that both systems continue to be used, usually to the benefit of the GOS. While IDPs recognize that their villages are not safe for return, they also realize that they must sow the land in order to keep it. Since they have to return either way, OCHA Representative said, many declare themselves "returnees" in the hopes of receiving GOS assistance, although they have no intention of staying past crop harvest. (Note: Field Officers have also heard reports that returnees are often not IDPs, rather pro-government tribes allowed to occupy fertile lands. End Note)

¶5. (SBU) Additional movements that have been documented by OCHA have involved IDPs from Chad crossing the border and making their way into North Darfur. These movements should not be classified as returns either, OCHA cautioned, as they are generally undertaken by 1-2 members of a family who return briefly to their village to assess the situation, reporting back to the rest of the family in the camp they previously left. SLA representatives in North Darfur have confirmed this practice to OCHA, reporting that "returnees" have not yet permanently resettled.

¶6. (SBU) International Organization for Migration (IOM) representatives explained that when reports of returns are received, there is an interagency committee, chaired jointly by IOM and OCHA, which looks at cases and decides on the level of assistance to provide. (Note: Much has been reported on the subject of what organizations can determine voluntary return based on agreements

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with the GNU. End note.) They said the issue of returns has not been raised recently in the camps, but confirmed that, in 2007, nearly 8000 households had returned to their villages. Most were Arab groups that returned to their lands near Kutum in North Darfur, and needs assessments revealed few needs that had not already been met. The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), which in partnership with the World Health Organization (WHO), is tasked with conducting post-return reproductive health assessments, reported that it has not even been called upon to conduct any such assessments for any of these "new" households.

... But Sees Continued GOS Pressure...

¶7. (SBU) Oxfam representatives said that, from their work in and around Kabkabiya and El Fasher, they were unaware of any IDPs returning to their villages. However they did report an increase in the amount of pressure and compensation that the GOS was leveraging to influence returns, noting that in many camps the GOS had been paying the sheikhs and umdas to encourage returns. Absent from government attempts to entice returns was any progress on the fundamental issues of safety and security, the most important issue to IDPs. Oxfam reported it had engaged in contingency planning for a drastic deterioration in conditions in Darfur and further displacement, but had not considered nor planned for the possibility of improvement in conditions or widespread returns. (Note: Other Organizations have reportedly developed similar contingency/emergency plans. End note)

... And Continued Displacement

¶9. (SBU) UNFPA reported in late 2007 an influx of new IDPs to the already bursting Zam Zam IDP camp near El Fasher. These new arrivals have reportedly settled in the Zam Zam IDP Camp, while debate continues with the HAC on whether to expand the camp or create a new IDP camp near El Fasher.

¶10. (SBU) OCHA reps confirmed that Zam Zam IDP camp (built with services for 40,000 IDPs) is operating at maximum capacity, with the

almost 9500 people that arrived in the camp between September 2007 and March 2008 bringing the total estimated population to over 50,000. (Note: Zam Zam is the only camp in El Fasher to remain open for new arrivals, both Al Salam and Abu Shouk have reached capacity and are closed for new registrations. End Note) These new IDPs are believed to be from the Sheiria region of South Darfur, and claim to have fled violence that peaked in September and October 2007 with attacks on Haskanita and Muhajariya. IOM reported that it is also seeing an increase in movement of Zaghawa tribes from South to North Darfur.

¶11. (SBU) COMMENT: GOS officials know that any current movement of IDPs is seasonal and not permanent. Neither the international nor local communities appear to take the HAC's annual declaration seriously, despite the commissioner's repeated theatrical performances in support of his cynical claims. Conditions are clearly inadequate for the debate on returns to resume, as camps scramble to accommodate new arrivals, and the issue will likely remain tabled until there is progress on the political and security fronts (including UNAMID deployment) but highlighting IDPs right to voluntary returns in safety and dignity, their right to their original land, and to compensation are all very much worth pushing with the Sudanese regime.

FERNANDEZ